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Masculinity, Masquerade, and Genetic Impersonation: *Gattaca's* Queer Visions

In the opening sequence of *Gattaca* (1997), an enigmatic scene of minimalist formal beauty gradually becomes a display of the shedding of abject bodily detritus for the purpose of an elaborate disguise. In the first few shots of the film, the excessive visual magnification of nail clippings, strands of hair, and flakes of skin effects a visual deception upon the audience: the nails look like large crescent-shaped pieces of frosted glass, the hair like lengths of rubber piping, the shower of skin like a beautiful snowfall. Initially unidentifiable, these gigantic bodily fragments fall in slow motion, hitting the ground with a thudding vibration as they eventually settle on a luminous blue surface that fills the screen. The exquisite visual poise of the mise-en-scène is underscored by Michael Nyman's melancholic, minimalist music, which completes the seductive aesthetic of tranquility and perfection governing the scene. As the magnification lessens, the human source of these falling objects is slowly revealed: a chin is being shaved; a rather androgynous chest is being scrubbed; muscular arms are being abraded. A male figure is shown vigorously and painfully discarding all these external bodily traces in a cubicle bathed in deep blue light; he leaves the shower room and, with a gesture suggesting the ease of daily habit, turns on the incinerator inside it to obliterate all evidence of his physical presence. This ritual cleansing then starts to look like something else: the work of disguise. The man takes two medical infusion bags from a refrigerator; he attaches one to his now hairless upper leg at the level usually reserved for a garter belt and injects a sample of the blood from the other into a pocket in a false fingertip, which he

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adheres to the index finger of his right hand, using an eyebrow brush to secure the edges. His routine complete, he drives to work at Gattaca, a space exploration center.

Gattaca is a film about a genetically defective man, Vincent (Ethan Hawke), who disguises himself as a genetically perfect one, Jerome (Jude Law). Its opening scene rehearses a disorienting visual deceit that condenses the film's more general exploration of the artifice of masculine perfection in the age of genetic engineering. These hypermagnified shots of bodily fragments foreshadow the film's more general investigation of the relationship between scientific and cinematic technologies. The scientific and cinematic gazes merge as microscopic magnification and extreme close-up shots combine in this credit sequence to bring us close enough to these corporeal fragments to feel as if we could almost touch them.[1] Seeing the body so close up and yet misrecognizing it so profoundly invites contemplation of the relationship between seeing and knowing, between observable corporeal surfaces and the identities beneath them. Should we trust the knowledge promised by visual technologies? To what extent can they deliver the truth of a person's identity? For if these close-up shots offer the promise of truth through the magnified and slowed-down image, they do so, ultimately, only to undermine its certainty: more vision, in this film, often leads to less knowledge, to distortion, to misreading, and even to a reversal of perception.[2] What appears under the microscopic cinematic gaze as a beautiful snow scene is transformed into a shower of discarded dead skin by a slight shift in visual perspective. The slowing down of time combines with the magnification of objects to transform bodily abjection into aesthetically pleasing abstraction. And as the whole trajectory of the film demonstrates, visual evidence and genetic evidence are not seamless equivalents, nor are they reliably transparent; both are open to manipulation and susceptible to the indeterminacies of interpretation. Even where genetic engineering promises to make biology definitively predictive, image and identity cannot simply be read from technology; they must be achieved through it. In *Gattaca*, identity is not a straightforward question of image or even of embodiment; rather, it is informatic. Identity here is a question of convincing your audience that

[1] The touchability of the image here is reminiscent of what Laura Marks (2000) has called a "haptic" quality.

[2] The relationships among technology, surveillance, and knowledge are a familiar theme in science fiction, e.g., in *Minority Report* (2002). For cultural analyses of science fiction film more generally, see Kuhn 1990, 1999; Penley et al. 1991; Sobchack 1997; Telotte 1999; Wood 2002.

the genetic screening technologies designed to return the sign of the body to transparency make human interpretation unnecessary.

Set in the not-too-distant future, *Gattaca* is a dystopian science fiction thriller offering a fantasy of a rigidly hierarchical society in which genetic screening and selection brutally govern the fate of individuals. People's DNA can be tested from envelopes they have licked, hands they have shaken, mouths they have kissed, eyelashes they have shed. For a fee, anyone can use a strand of hair to have a potential sexual partner sequenced in a matter of minutes, to match for genetic compatibility. This is a world in which the blood test has replaced the police interrogation and the urine test has replaced the job interview. The inequalities that result from these genetic selections are presented most sharply in the space agency, Gattaca. Here, valids (those selected from genetically superior embryos) occupy the high-status positions and are valued for their exceptional intellectual and physical attributes, while those not preselected, the in-valids, a term with obvious connotations of physical inferiority, constitute the team of cleaners that services the building and its employees. *Gattaca* presents the nightmare of a new form of segregated workforce whose classification seems to have made perversely irrelevant the traditional antidemocratic hierarchies of race, class, and gender: in this world of genetic normativity, even white middle-class men like Vincent can be destined for repetitive, menial labor.[3] Motivated by sibling rivalry, however, he proves his brother, his father, and the scientists wrong (but his mother right), defying the limits of his genetically predicted future by becoming a space navigator at Gattaca. The means to this rebellious end is the adoption of the genetic identity of a valid—Jerome Eugene Morrow—an Olympic-standard swimmer whose genetic code is practically perfect but whose accident abroad has left him wheelchair bound.

The quest for genetic perfection that governs *Gattaca*'s dystopian fantasy is articulated through the film's fascination with visual perfection (see fig. 1). As David Kirby has written, "Visually GATTACA conveys an antiseptic world that has been purged of imperfections. . . . [The sets] show a sterile and blemish-free world filled with smooth stainless steel surfaces" (Kirby 2000, 204). The preoccupation with visual perfection within a world of genetic normativity is centrally elaborated through Vincent's disguise as Jerome. Vincent imitates visual perfection by impersonating Jerome (whose embodiment of desirability is amplified by the casting of

[3] As Kaja Silverman (1991) has argued in relation to *Blade Runner* (1982), slavery separated from race provides a fertile fantasy for the threat of replication in science fiction film.

Figure 1 The mise-en-scène is governed by a genetic aesthetic of a particular visual perfection (symmetry, order, repetition, balance), as exemplified here in Gattaca's gymnasium. Courtesy of the British Film Institute. Color version available as an online enhancement.

Jude Law) and by displaying the exacting precision of disguise necessary to avoid genetic detection. The opening scene shows Vincent's daily physical transformation into Jerome as a spectacle of identity production. And yet, in so doing, it displays for the cinema audience precisely the deceit that genetic screening promises to eradicate. In order to imitate Jerome's genetic perfection, Vincent changes both his outward appearance to approximate Jerome's image and his "informatic code" by substituting the bodily markers of Jerome's genetic information (blood, urine, skin, hair) for his own. In this spectacle, the technologies of imitation are set against the technologies of genetic testing. With Jerome's assistance, Vincent becomes master of the image and master of deception. Artifice is their greatest ally against genetic determinism.

If the veracity of visual evidence is destabilized in *Gattaca*, so too is the veracity of the body as the guarantor of the apparent truths of gender, genealogy, and kinship. In placing Vincent and Jerome's criminal deception at the heart of the discrepancy between visual evidence and genetic evidence (between the image and information), the film arguably undoes the singularity of masculine sovereignty and queers traditional forms of kinship as much as it does conventional forms of vision.[4] Biogenetic in-

[4] For a discussion of alternative kinship modes within lesbian, gay, and queer communities, see Weston 1991.

heritance is displaced through the rejection of genetic normativity as the audience gradually becomes privy to the alternative bonds of relatedness and forms of intimacy between the two men. For the production of Vincent and Jerome's shared bodily substances requires the improvisation of an intermasculine kinship with a distinctly queer feel.[5] In their reinvention of the blood tie as genetic impersonation, Vincent and Jerome unite against normative injustice in their new form of shared embodiment.[6] Like the male "couples" in *Rope* (1948) and *Swoon* (1992), Vincent and Jerome are locked into a sometimes claustrophobic mutual dependence; their combined ingenuity is required to execute their crime successfully. But unlike the couples in *Rope* and *Swoon*, Vincent and Jerome are tied to each other through a commitment to a new, shared fabricated persona (one gives his body, the other his dream), and thus their loyalty to each other is always also a loyalty to themselves. Their embodied deception defies both the conventions of masculine singularity and the deterministic laws of the new genetics through a reconceptualization of identity beyond traditional definitions of genealogy, gender, and heterosexuality.[7]

In this sense, although *Gattaca* is not strictly a cloning film, such as *Multiplicity* (1996), *Alien Resurrection* (1997), and *Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), it nevertheless shares a preoccupation with technologies of duplication and a fascination with deviant forms of relatedness.[8] While rejecting the injustice of genetic determinism, the film nevertheless stages a cinematic vision of cloning through the imitative replication of masculine perfection. Vincent becomes Jerome's clone insofar as he successfully passes as genetically perfect at Gattaca. The play with narrative tensions around passing (will Vincent be caught?) rehearses the familiar generic concern of science fiction with the problem of the authenticity of identity and the suspense around detection; it also, of course, rehearses a set of associations with the homosexual closet.[9] In the face of their possible discovery, Vincent and Jerome's mutual loyalty and devotion to their secret commitment are repeatedly tested and ultimately strengthened. The intimate exchanges between the two men (of fluids,

[5] I am grateful to Lauren Berlant for suggesting the term *improvisation* here.

[6] For a recent analysis of the blood tie and kinship theory, see Franklin and McKinnon 2001.

[7] I am indebted to the "Postmodern Genealogies" reading group at Lancaster University for discussions about queer kinship and shared bodily substances.

[8] For an analysis of the queer cloning of Ripley in *Alien Resurrection* (1997), see Stacey 2003.

[9] The suspense about who is authentic and who is artificial is endlessly rehearsed in science fiction film, most famously perhaps in *Blade Runner* (1982).

of knowledge, of dreams, of identities) expose the limits of their individual autonomy and push to the surface the mutuality of their improvised embodiment. In cloning Jerome, the two men enter the terrain not only of queer kinship but also of homoeroticism. Passing and cloning (with their obvious homosexual connotations) are only two dimensions of the queer implications of the criminal intimacy of genetic deception in this film.

In this article, I focus on the ways in which these multiple queer improvisations are set in tension with the more traditional cinematic organization of sexual difference. The combination of the display of the artifice of a masculine impersonation with the queering of kinship in a post-genealogical age makes this film interesting for feminist analysis. For while Vincent's disguise requires a consideration of the operations of sexual difference in this spectacle of masculine artifice, the intimacy of his collaboration with Jerome as master of genetic disguise calls for queer theory to unravel the homoeroticism of impersonation and new loyalties of queer kinship. Taking *Gattaca* as my central text, I shall examine the problem of rendering masculinity an authentic, stable identity when it is produced as a jointly authored technological achievement of genetic disguise between two male collaborators.[10]

Theorizing the masquerade

The display of artifice in the cinema has been widely debated within feminist film theory through the concept of masquerade.[11] Within the psychoanalytic version of these debates, feminists have claimed that the masquerade is not only closely connected to femininity but is also inextricable from its cultural ascription within patriarchal representational systems such as Hollywood cinema. According to such a model, masculinity can only be designated a place outside the performance of the masquerade.[12] Feminist film theorists, most notably Mary Ann Doane ([1982] 1991a, [1988–89] 1991b), have reread psychoanalyst Joan Ri-

[10] There is now a vast literature that builds on the earlier work of Richard Dyer (1982) and Steve Neale (1983) on the construction of masculinity as spectacle. For more recent analyses, see Cohan and Hark 1993; Kirkham and Thumim 1993; Tasker 1993; Lehman 2001; Holmlund 2002.

[11] Claire Johnston (1975) first used the term *masquerade* to analyze the place of woman in film; for a detailed genealogy of the uses of the psychoanalytic term *masquerade* in film theory during the 1970s and 1980s, see Fletcher 1988.

[12] In her famous 1929 essay, "Womanliness as Masquerade," Joan Riviere discusses the case of a female academic who exaggerated her femininity following successful public-speaking engagements as a way to contradict her "theft" of masculine authority ([1929] 1986).

viere's original 1929 case to argue that theorizing "femininity as masquerade" might provide a means to explain the constraints of the place of "woman as image" within a sign system governed by the law of the paternal signifier. Riviere explored the idea that "women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men" (Riviere [1929] 1986, 35). Importantly, Doane argues, there is a "curious blend of activity and passivity in masquerade (Riviere's patient actively strives to produce herself as the passive image of male attention)" and there is a "corresponding blurring of the opposition between production and reception" ([1988–89] 1991b, 39). For Doane, the concept of the masquerade highlights a crucial contradiction "insofar as it attributes to the woman the distance, alienation and divisiveness of self (which is constitutive of subjectivity in psychoanalysis) rather than the closeness and excessive presence which are the logical outcome of the psychoanalytic drama of sexualized linguistic difference" ([1988–89] 1991b, 37). Doane emphasizes here how central reading and interpretation are to understanding both masquerade and femininity. Thus, although the masquerade "is also haunted by a masculine standard, masculinity as measure is not internal to the concept itself. . . . Rather, in masquerade, masculinity is present as the context provoking the patient's reaction-formation" (Doane [1988–89] 1991b, 39). Masculinity's relationship to masquerade is thus placed outside the concept itself and takes form only in producing the reaction in the audience or the readership.[13]

If duplicity through artifice has had such a strongly feminine set of connotations within feminist film theory, how might we interpret the masculine imitation of masculinity in a film such as *Gattaca*, in which two male characters combine their ingenuity and their resources to produce a deceptive image of genetic perfection?[14] In the opening scene discussed above, a spectacle of fetishistic bodily cleanliness and grooming, such attention to the detail of a man's bodily transformation establishes an immediate association with femininity: that is, an identity achieved through the labor of producing a perfect body using whatever artifice is available and bearing whatever pain is necessary. In this scene, a number of close-up shots of Vincent's body confirm these more general feminine connotations: the smooth, hairless skin, the somewhat androgynous chest, the positioning and attachment of the urine bag as if it were a garter belt,

[13] For a detailed discussion of masculinity and masquerade, see also Studlar 1996.

[14] For discussions of the display of the masculine body through imitation and disguise, see Cohan 1992, 397, and Holmlund 1993.

the delicate and expert use of the eyebrow brush. Moreover, there is a deeper association here based on the troubling potential for disguise in an identity premised on artifice. For if the work of femininity is not only to produce an image but thereby to achieve an identity, the figure of the woman can be cast as the site for endless suspicion. Taking its most treacherous form in the figure of the femme fatale, the deployment of a physical image to effect a disguise is a move associated with the deceit of femininity. In this scene, the scrupulous shedding of hair and skin to produce a smooth, less legible surface and the meticulous attachment of blood and urine from refrigerated infusion bags all imply that the end product of this ritual is some kind of deception.

Vincent's impersonation of Jerome is potentially feminizing not only as a prosthetic spectacle but also in its clear intention as criminal disguise. As Doane points out, Riviere repeatedly associates the masquerade with theft and "stolen goods," since womanliness as masquerade covers the theft of masculinity (Riviere [1929] 1986, 38). In *Gattaca*, Vincent is not only associated with fraud, but, more significantly, his deception is narratively tied in to a murder. The connection between Vincent and criminality is elaborated in a number of ways: the sight of the murder of one of Gattaca's directors coincides with the dissolve into an extended flashback in which Vincent's voice-over explains the history of his fraudulent identity to the audience; as the murder investigation accelerates, detectives (headed, unbeknownst to the audience, by Vincent's valid brother, Anton) and their genetic screening devices threaten the continued success of his disguise; moreover, his colleague and, later, lover, Irene (Uma Thurman), becomes suspicious that Vincent did in fact murder the director. The exploration of Vincent's deception thus becomes narratively inextricable from the investigation of the murder. Vincent is structurally placed in the traditional position of the femme fatale—through its disguise, his body is potentially associated with treachery.

In imitating Jerome, Vincent has "stolen" a masculinity that is not his own. Does Vincent thereby somehow inhabit the traditionally feminine place of the one who performs the image for the other? How is this spectacle gendered if it displays an imitation of a better masculinity? In her original essay, Doane wrote, "The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask that can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic. . . . To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image" (Doane [1982] 1991a, 25–26). If, as Judith Butler has argued, "Riviere's text

offers a way to reconsider the question: What is masked by masquerade?" (Butler 1990, 53), it is tempting to read the production of Vincent's imitative masculinity in *Gattaca* as the reverse of Doane's description: producing a closeness to the image that masculinity usually lacks, closing the gap between the self and the image usually reserved for femininity, or as the feminizing mask that sutures image and identity through genetic disguise.[15] But here the limits of the concept of masquerade become apparent: with their exclusively visual emphasis, theories of masquerade cannot capture the dynamics of genetic disguise at stake in *Gattaca*. Passing through masquerade, Vincent perfects not only the image but also the legibility of the code. Confirming the importance of Doane's emphasis on interpretation in the case of femininity as masquerade and yet moving beyond the image as the exclusive site of the production of identity, genetic disguise here confounds the formulations of such theories. Vincent's imitation of genetic perfection is not so much a feminizing masquerade as an imposture of informatics that turns inside out the meaning of identity. If identity is now to be legible as a genetic code, new technologies of interpretation open up possibilities of interference and intervention. Biogenetic mimesis becomes the new disavowal of authenticity.

This twist to the status of the image in *Gattaca* problematizes any straightforward reading of Vincent's disguise as simply a feminizing masquerade. Throughout the film, the promise of the truth of visual evidence is subtly undermined even as it is reiterated: close-up shots of fragments of the human body refer back to the credit sequence, where the microscopic modes of spectatorship produce a striking proximity to the image but do so ambiguously. In a world in which everyone's genetic code can be technologically translated into a visual image (the genetic identification card shows the person's name, DNA sequence, and photograph), the authorities are so sure of the infallibility of their techniques of surveillance that no one actually looks at photographs any more. As the broker who introduces Vincent and Jerome says, "When was the last time anybody looked at a photograph?" While surveillance technologies are intended for social regulation, their ubiquity introduces new possibilities for disguise; as Hillel Schwartz writes: "In a world of proliferant degrees and diplomas, impostors have more room than ever to move on from one half-life to the next. These days embossed papers substitute for personhood, identification cards for identity, licences for learning" (1996, 71). The proliferation of information renders looking redundant. Turning their domestic apartment into a stylish cloning laboratory, Vincent and Jerome

[15] For a discussion of "female masculinity" in film, see Halberstam 1998.

Figure 2 Vincent (Ethan Hawke) transforms himself into the new Jerome, the embodiment of genetic perfection. Courtesy of the British Film Institute. Color version available as an online enhancement.

succeed in an elaborate deception that plays the blind spots of the scientific gaze back to the corporate authorities at Gattaca, dodging the scrutiny of the scientific gaze by hiding in the shadows of its own occlusions.

Masculinity as singularity

The instability of visual evidence in *Gattaca* can be read as an analogue to the film's exploration of masculine desire. On the one hand, it is Vincent's highly conventional masculine drive and ambition that propel the narrative forward and his success that brings satisfactory narrative closure. As the surveillance tightens, the new Jerome becomes tougher and more determined: as Jerome, he becomes invincible (not-Vincent; see fig. 2). His potentially feminizing self-fabrication operates in the service of his masculine desire for sovereignty and agency. And yet, on the other hand, there is also a challenge to the stability of the all-seeing, all-knowing masculine spectator position. For each time we might feel seduced by the fantasy of panoptic vision through our shared point of view with the protagonist, our omnipotent delusions are thwarted, not only as Vincent himself faces the next unexpected challenge but also as we are dislodged from the security of such an alignment. For example, the surprising discovery that the detective in charge of the murder investigation is Vincent's

younger brother, Anton, reveals that our hero has been hiding something even from us. Moreover, although the film deploys typical Hollywood techniques (such as flashback and voice-over) in order to position the spectator with Vincent, this is undermined by the lack of a sense of emotional depth to Vincent's interiority. Like the forms of its presentation, Vincent's subjectivity remains a convention.

Similarly, although the narrative is structured around Vincent's desire to achieve heroic status and to prove the justice of meritocracy, the film's own awareness of this as a convention of masculinity confounds its straightforward alignment with spectatorial pleasure. Vincent's desire for autonomous agency is presented precisely as his desire; it never fully becomes his identity. For as we shall see, Vincent never fully inhabits "valid" masculinity; he never fully becomes the author of his new identity as Jerome. The film's repeated thwarting of Vincent's desire to author his own success is a narrative device to produce suspense, and yet it has the cumulative effect of questioning the foundational drive behind it. *Gattaca* explores Vincent's masculine drive and, in placing him outside the dominant eugenic values of his society, invites us to invest in the success of his deception, and yet in denying him agency in his final achievement, ultimately leaves Vincent's desire for autonomy as a fantasy position. This works in conjunction with the way the film places him (along with Gattaca and its eugenic project) at one remove from the critical spectator position it establishes. For Vincent wants to be accepted by the very institution whose values his story has taught us to mistrust and abhor, and thus our position in relation to his success remains partially skeptical. Like the breathtaking scale of the monumentalist architecture or the impressive symmetry of the chrome interiors, Vincent's ambition belongs to a masculine order that the film renders politically dubious, based as it is on an illusory fantasy of control, predictability, and order. The film presents this fantasy of masculinity through a series of reiterative performances, and in so doing it both animates masculine desire for omnipotence and disavows the credibility of these performances by locating them firmly within a eugenic aesthetic associated with dangerous delusions of totalitarianism and fascism.

The modes of disjunctive temporality that operate in the film further mark the gap between Vincent's desire and that of the spectator. For *Gattaca* is an all-too-familiar version of the future. Using clichéd fantasies of technoscientific endeavor from the "not-too-distant past" (such as rocket science and space travel), *Gattaca* presents the masculine desire governing the hierarchies of a genetically determinist world as an ironic reflection on the modernist vision of the earlier period in which they are

placed: the flashback to Vincent's childhood offers sepia scenes of stereotypical 1950s family life, together with retro-style furniture, cars, and clothes; the use of space exploration as the mise-en-scène of masculine ambition plays with a now-outmoded notion of space travel as the "final frontier" for the progress of mankind. The image of a rocket launching into space (with which the film closes) to symbolize the final realization of Vincent's dream places the spectator in the paradoxical temporality of being transported back to the future.

Vincent's masculinity in *Gattaca* is thus the rehearsal of a desire rather than the achievement of an identity. As Joan Copjec has pointed out, according to Jacques Lacan "no man can boast that he embodies this thing—masculinity. All pretensions of masculinity are then sheer imposture; just as every display of femininity is sheer masquerade" (Copjec 1994, 234). Vincent's genetic disguise makes him the impostor who exposes the more general facade of "authentic" masculinity. It is as much about the repetition of the impossibility of masculinity (as the invincible, autonomous agent of events, as the original and the originator of meaning) as it is about the securing of its authentic form: "Impostures succeed because, not in spite, of their fictitiousness. They take wing with congenial cultural fantasies" (Schwartz 1996, 71). Vincent performs the pretense of masculinity, and his elaborate disguise is a cinematic enactment of the impossibility of ever embodying its literal form. In short, Vincent is an impostor whose disguise reveals him to be surrounded by impostors. For Copjec, Lacan's "desubstantialization of sex . . . has allowed us to perceive the fraudulence at the heart of every claim to positive sexual identity" (Copjec 1994, 234). Butler elaborates Lacan's position thus: "[Lacan] poses the relation between the sexes in terms that reveal the speaking 'I' as a masculinized effect of repression, one which postures as an autonomous and self-grounding subject, but whose very coherence is called into question by the sexual relation that it excludes in the process of identity formation. . . . The masculine subject only *appears* to originate meaning and thereby to signify. His seemingly self-grounded autonomy attempts to conceal the repression which is both its ground and the perpetual possibility of its own ungrounding" (Butler 1990, 44–45). In *Gattaca*, the masculine subject appears to originate not only meaning but also life itself.[16] The repression required for the fraudulence of identity to succeed is turned into a science. The maternal body, as Susan George has argued, is displaced by the genetic selection of embryos before they are implanted

[16] For a discussion of "life itself" in the context of the new genetics, see Franklin 2000, 188–227.

into the woman's body, rendering the mother marginal to reproduction (George 2001). Contrasting with the very physical scene of Vincent's birth earlier in the film, which shows the sweat and pain of his mother in labor, Anton's genetic selection shows four embryos imaged on a computer screen. Vincent's parents must agree to the suggested selection of the chosen one, the singular promise of embodied perfection. The geneticist (like the manager at the company who will later reject Vincent as an in-valid before the job interview begins) is black, suggesting the separation of eugenics from its racist past and cautioning against the new hierarchies beyond race that genetic normativity might produce. The display of the four embryos on the screen alongside the recitation of the genetic information transforms reproduction from a scene of human risk and adventure into one of an exact predictable science and conception into a disembodied virtual selection of a known entity. Reproduction hereby becomes a form of authorship, as the masculine subject becomes the originator of meaning and paternity takes on the art of science.[17]

The promise of genetic screening is to give a scientific certainty to the fantasy of authorship and autonomy that governs conventional masculinity. The film systematically presents but then undoes the foundations of such a fantasy through its exposure of the illusions of the predictive certainty of genetic codes. One by one, each of the genetic predictions whose truths have justified the structures of *Gattaca*'s unjust society is undermined: the genetically guaranteed peaceful director of Gattaca turns to murder to defend his galactic vision; the doctor at Gattaca has an in-valid son, despite all the technological means at his disposal; genetically perfect Jerome wins only the silver medal and consequently attempts suicide (leaving him in a wheelchair); and valid Anton cannot match in-valid Vincent's intellectual ingenuity or physical determination. These masculine subjects become the "impostors" against whom Vincent pits his willpower and his intelligence: Can he trick the director, can he become Jerome, can he beat Anton? In his fraudulent genetic identity, as the one who "postures as an autonomous and self-grounding subject" and yet can never be one, Vincent repeatedly performs his masculinity in relation to a series of masculine others who represent the threat of the "perpetual possibility of [his] own ungrounding" (Butler 1990, 45). The substance of his masculinity is tested through a series of challenges to the "masculine impostors" around Vincent who stand for the supposed genetic perfection of the valid sign.

[17] Rosi Braidotti offers a critique of how fantasies of reproductive technologies in science fiction film have produced the reinvention of a paternity that allows the exclusion of women from reproduction; see Braidotti 2002, 222–63.

Genetic perfection is the scientific equivalent of masculine singularity. As Marie-Luise Angerer (2000) has argued, from a Lacanian position the fraudulence of masculinity lies in its imagined singularity. The imposture of masculinity is the imagining of the self as singular, as "the one"—the only one. In *Gattaca*, Vincent rehearses this fantasy. Can he become the author of his own desired identity? Can he prove he is "the one"? But Vincent's ambition to demonstrate the outstanding singularity of his masculinity, by pitting it against the superior claims of the valids, produces instead a relational identity, proving perfection in singularity to be an illusion.

Impostors and impersonators

Nowhere is the singularity of Vincent's heroic masculinity more clearly undone than in his collaboration with Jerome: it is not one but two men who defy the laws of genetic determinism in *Gattaca*. Vincent's individual agency is dependent on a collaborative, relational masculinity, for this is not a single imposture but a *duplicity*—as this word suggests, this is a double vision. This twofold agency requires an investigation of Vincent not only as an impostor but also as an impersonator. In thinking about this distinction in relation to doubles ("imposture, the compulsive assumption of invented lives, and impersonation, the concerted assumption of another's public identity" [Schwartz 1996, 72]), Schwartz writes: "Double agency, implying a singleminded performance of two opposed roles with silent devotion to a cause, is the impersonator's stock in trade. . . . But impostors are unable to bear the burdens of double agency. Impersonation, not imposture, is at home with quiet deceit and may breed underground. Both may be impeccably costumed, yet in the final dressing down, impostors want attention and love, and we may betray them; impersonators want our money, our secrets, our family, and they betray us" (1996, 72–73). If the masculine impostor is the one who appears to have achieved the singularity of autonomy and self-grounding, then the masculine impersonator is the one who recognizes the paradox of the need for an other in order to achieve this illusion. In queer debates, Butler has famously drawn on Esther Newton's work on drag queens in the United States to argue that "the structure of impersonation reveals one of the key fabricating mechanisms through which the social construction of gender takes place" (Butler 1990, 136–37).[18] Claiming that "drag fully sub-

[18] In his work on Hollywood stars, Martin Shingler has pointed toward a theoretical

verts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (1990, 137), Butler quotes Newton's account of drag as follows: "At its most complex [drag] is a double inversion that says 'appearance is an illusion.' Drag says . . . 'my "outside" appearance is feminine, but my essence "inside" [the body] is masculine.' At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion: 'my appearance "outside" [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence "inside" [myself] is feminine'" (Newton 1972, 103). For Butler, drag visibly stages the gaps between the anatomy of the performer, gender identity, and the gender being performed: "*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*" (Butler 1990, 137; emphasis in original). Here repetition is crucial to thinking about the structure of impersonation. In her discussion of the problems of "writing as a lesbian," Butler suggests that "it is through the repeated play of this sexuality that the 'I' is insistently reconstituted as a lesbian 'I'; paradoxically, it is precisely the *repetition* of that play that establishes as well the *instability* of the very category that it constitutes" (1991, 18; emphasis in original). To the extent that impersonation requires the repetition of duplicity, we might ask, Does it make visible the internal contradictions of identity that will lead to its ultimate failure?[19] Extending feminist film theory through queer notions of impersonation, we might ask, What is specifically at stake when the "he" is the site of repetition, of the ritualized reconstruction of masculine perfection on the screen? In his impersonation of Jerome, is Vincent caught in the same linguistic bind that will eventually ensure his exposure, his failure?

To impersonate is "to invest with personality or the bodily substance of a person."[20] The addition of the supposedly unique attributes of "personality" or of "bodily substance" to another suggests an artificiality that is the reverse of impersonation's authenticating intention (the desire to pass as someone else). Impersonation thus makes a double move: it involves the production of authenticity and of a copy. It both effects and undoes personhood. But how might we think about the cinematic fantasy of a double impersonation, in which two bodies combine to produce a

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model that might combine psychoanalytic theories of masquerade with Butler's rereading of gender impersonation through drag (Shingler 1995, 192).

[19] For Steve Cohan, Butler's insistence on gender as "performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler 1990, 25)—allows for the consideration of masculinity as masquerade in film, not as a mask but as a "persona" (Cohan 1992, 398).

[20] *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (Edinburgh: W & R Chambers, 1973).

renewed version of genetic perfection? In impersonating Jerome, Vincent invests himself with the bodily substance (the DNA sequence) and, by implication, the personality of another. It is their combined labor that achieves a composite impersonation of masculine perfection: Jerome produces his own bodily fragments and samples, and Vincent reembodies them to produce the new Jerome.

If the masquerade functions as an imitation of a feminine identity that is already a mask, what kind of masculinity is achieved through the impersonation of genetic perfection? The concept of impersonation captures the new tension between image and identity invoked by genetic engineering, which produces both original and copy. The binarisms (original and copy, authenticity and artifice, self and other) of traditional identity formation become redundant as biological reproduction is replaced by genetic selection and recognition is now based on DNA profiling. If impersonation means to invest with the personality or the bodily substance of a person, is genetic perfection not thereby already an impersonation? The new genetics invites us to intervene in the identities and futures of others. In his impersonation of Jerome's supposedly unique genetic identity, Vincent confounds the truth claims of the predictions of technoscience and of the singularity of masculinity. His deception literalizes the question of the legibility of identity—of the language of genetics and the language of gender. The supposed transparency of genetic information is opened up to the politics of interpretation; the supposed authenticity of masculinity is exposed as a set of techniques that has become a marketable commodity. In the dynamic between Vincent and Jerome, masculinity shifts back and forth between them and becomes a transferable skill.

With the making of the new Jerome, there is a transfer of power and authority between the in-valid Vincent and the previously valid but now immobilized Jerome. The scenes of Vincent's early adult life show the impossibility of his becoming the self-grounding subject of masculinity: he is part of the anonymous workforce that polishes the shiny surfaces at Gattaca in which "the chosen ones" will see themselves reflected back as the proper subjects they desire to be. But he cannot bear the repetitive work of cleaning (work typically associated with women, black people, and the working classes but here designated across those divisions to a new menial labor force of genetic imperfection) and attempts to build up his own body in order to turn himself into a proper figure of masculine strength. Eventually, he recognizes he cannot go it alone; he needs a borrowed ladder to climb up the genetic hierarchy to achieve masculine agency.

Figure 3 Jerome (Jude Law) as the embodiment of failed masculine genetic perfection: the in-validated "valid." Courtesy of the British Film Institute. Color version available as an online enhancement.

Jerome, on the other hand, enters the film as a valid who is marked through his disability as an in-valid. He first appears sitting in his wheelchair, smoking and scrutinizing Vincent with his piercing blue eyes (see fig. 3). His wheelchair sits at the foot of the double helix–shaped staircase, the striking spiral design of which cruelly literalizes his exclusion from the sign of his previous superiority and emphasizes the irony of genetic perfection in the face of immobility. Although his disability excludes him from valid masculinity, he struggles to retain the superior status suggested by his air of upper-class English affectation. But such condescension is undercut by signs of decline and decadence, indicative of a similar loss of social power and status. His disability marks the imposture of his previously valid status (winning "only" a silver medal and then attempting, and failing, to commit suicide); despite his DNA, he cannot be "the one." Nothing guarantees the successful embodiment of perfection; its fragility is the only certainty. Jerome thus represents the desired masculinity of genetic selection while simultaneously marking the fragility of its embodied capacity.

But Jerome's masculinity is reauthorized in a later scene, appropriately enough through his impersonation of himself. Jerome leaves his wheelchair and hauls himself up the double helix staircase to greet the detective,

Anton (distracting him from the technologies of impersonation on the floor below).[21] As he accomplishes this almost impossible feat of passing as his previously able-bodied self, dignity, self-respect, and masculine integrity are restored to Jerome. Ironically, it is through impersonation that masculinity is repeatedly deauthorized and reauthorized throughout the film; its varying degrees are articulated in the two men's identities in highly relational terms.[22]

Queering kinship

This complex relay of transferable identities brings with it a series of associations of kin relatedness. Although this is a nonbiological relationship in the traditional genealogical sense, it is nevertheless all about shared biogenetic substances. Repeated close-up shots of bodily substances invoke a sense of shared embodiment through a nongenealogical kinship bond. If the blood tie has been Western culture's mark of genealogy through kinship, then Vincent and Jerome reinvent kinship through the use of the borrowed ladder. In this distinctly unconventional exchange of genetic material through prosthetic embodiment, the permanent and enduring ties of genealogy are replaced by a new relatedness.

Contrasting traditional notions of kinship ties as "unalterable biogenetic connections [that] accounted for the permanence of this very special sort of social relation" (1998, 58) with new forms of relatedness, or "fictive kinship" (1991, 105), Kath Weston explores the enduring loyalty and commitment of queer kinship systems. In *Gattaca*, Vincent's adoption of a new biogenetic identity occurs not only in the context of his rejection of his biological family but also, in the end, through a filial power struggle that he wins: in all the loyalty tests, "fictive kinship" wins out over genealogy. But perhaps *improvised kinship* is a better term for Vincent and Jerome's relationship. As in all improvisations, this new form of kinship relies both on experimentation and risk and on a mutual trust and a shared knowledge. While it is at first a pragmatic business deal in which the borrowed ladder is a commodity, the intimacy between the two characters soon stretches beyond purely commercial necessity. Vincent and Jerome's

[21] This scene echoes Scottie's famous attempt to overcome his anxiety and climb the steps of the church tower in *Vertigo* (1958). See Modleski 1988.

[22] The investment of Jerome with a masculinity so desirable that others want to become him represents a recurrent dimension of Jude Law's star image; see, e.g., *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999) and Straayer 2001. In both *eXistenZ* (1999) and *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), Law is positioned as the object of desire; he embodies the ideals of masculine perfection, but his relationship to artificiality places him at one remove from such an embodiment.

improvisation produces a commitment typically reserved only for kin or for lovers: they share bodily substances; they willingly risk their lives for each other.

The improvised kinship tie between Vincent and Jerome is given symbolic permanence in the scene of Jerome's suicide. As Vincent is reborn in the closing scene, Jerome is released from life. As Weston argues, "Only a biological process (death), as opposed to a social process (rejection, neglect), is supposed to be capable of sundering 'blood' ties. In this reading death becomes the terminus that marks the forever in a relationship" (1998, 78). With Jerome's death comes the confirmation of their permanent tie; in this romantic image of foreverness, the fantasy of a shared future is confirmed. When the two finally separate (Jerome commits suicide, Vincent goes into space), Jerome gives Vincent a lock of his hair—an ironically romantic gesture in the wake of their genetic impersonation.

So how might the forms of genetic impersonation and queer improvisations of kinship in *Gattaca* require us to extend our thinking about sexuality in the culture of the copy? As is so often the case in popular representations of genetic engineering, the heterosexual/homosexual distinction is clearly under scrutiny here. Throughout the film, the anxiety about detection is staged around what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called "the relations of the closet—the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the implicit" (Sedgwick 1994, 3). Vincent and Jerome's deception places them in a shared domestic space full of secrets, puts them at odds with society, and requires their utter loyalty to each other in the project of passing; their mutual trust is paramount to the success of their crime.[23] The relations of the closet that govern the staging of their conspiracy are reiterated in the homosexual connotations of the "perfect match" of Vincent and Jerome: the broker comments that "you two look so good together, I want to double my fee." The labor involved in the crime of genetic deception produces a physical intimacy between them that reinforces these associations. Vincent literally wears Jerome's body on his own. Jerome's gift to Vincent before his eventual (successful) suicide is to leave him samples of his bodily fluids—"enough for two lifetimes." Through what we might call the "prosthetic intimacy" of genetic

[23] Along with lesbian and gay "passing," there are other forms of passing that are obviously connoted here: the rejection of Vincent from education and employment in *Gattaca* is reminiscent of the exclusion of black people from nurseries, schools, and jobs in the United States prior to the civil rights era. For a discussion of racial passing, see Young 1996 and Ahmed 1999.

impersonation, Vincent and Jerome share the most intricate knowledge of each other's bodies.

Even more explicitly homosexual associations are articulated through Jerome's persona as the upper-class British fading retrodandy and self-pitying lush. He combines many of the qualities of what Richard Dyer identifies as the "sad young man" of 1950s and 1960s cinema: he is a figure of pity who is often shown as melancholic, pathetic, and both "irredeemably sad and overwhelmingly desirable" (Dyer 1993, 73). Squabbling on the telephone with the hair dye supplier about whether they have sent him "summer wheat" instead of "honey dawn," he enacts the classic stereotype of the "neurotic, hysterical, bitchy gay man" (Dyer 1993, 84). Their relationship also performs many of the clichés of a conventional heterosexual marriage: Vincent is the husband who goes out to work and is ambitious in the public sphere; Jerome stays at home and fusses over domestic routines and cosmetics. He drinks more and more and begins to act like a frustrated and jealous housewife. Ultimately, the only meaning in Jerome's life is sharing Vincent's dream.

This homoerotic intimacy, however, is disrupted by a third (female) term—that of Irene. This configuration is typical of what Sedgwick identifies as "a cultural system in which male-male desire [has become] widely intelligible primarily by being routed through triangular relations involving a woman" (Sedgwick 1994, 15). As the object of romantic interest for Vincent, Irene poses a threat to the exclusivity of the male bond between Vincent and Jerome.[24] And yet Irene also has an uncanny resemblance to Jerome: she shares his facial characteristics—high cheekbones, wide jawline, steel-blue eyes, neat nose—and so mirrors Jerome's embodiment of white perfection. As such, Irene is placed as the feminine counterpart or even the heterosexual equivalent of Jerome (see fig. 4). Although Vincent's relationship with Irene is in some senses a traditional heterosexual romance, it might also be read through what Sedgwick calls the "projective fantasy" of "vicariated desire" (1994, 156–57). The notion of "chains of vicariation" (1994, 159) points to the interplay between identification and desire and between sameness and difference articulated in these triangular substitutions. Thus, we might ask, with Sedgwick, "How are we to know whose desire it is that is . . . figured? By whom can it be figured?" (1994, 157).

[24] The triangulated dynamics of "homosocial desire," normally opposed to homosexual desire, is the subject of Sedgwick's (1985) analysis of the "discriminations and paradoxes" of such an ascription. For a discussion of these triangular dynamics in the novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (Highsmith [1955] 1992), see Straayer 2001, 116.

Figure 4 Irene (Uma Thurman) as the uncanny heterosexual female equivalent of Jerome (Jude Law). Courtesy of the British Film Institute. Color version available as an online enhancement.

This problem is amplified in a film about genetic impersonation: as an impersonation, Vincent is already a substitute for Jerome, and as a valid, Jerome is already "artificially" genetically selected. These genetic impersonations figure multiple "chains of vicariation" that disrupt the singularity of gender and sexuality and the authenticity of their embodied forms. Vicarious desire for an impersonation presents an endless series of substitutions. Irene might be understood as a heterosexual object of desire, but one whose role is inextricable from the intimacy between Vincent and Jerome, an intimacy that is itself founded on a desire to become the other. In this context we might ask, Is Irene a substitute love object for Jerome, or is Vincent? When Jerome is feeling jealous, is he wishing he were Vincent or Irene? Is Vincent sexually appealing to Irene only in his impersonation of Jerome? Following the logic of this relay of queer substitutions through to its conclusion, we might ask if Jerome desires himself (in desiring to be Vincent, who desires Irene, who is a substitute for Jerome). Indeed, perhaps this leads to the most disturbing fantasy about cloning—that we shall end up desiring ourselves.[25]

Gattaca presents a vision of the triumph of individual masculine desire

[25] Thanks to Amelia Jones for her insightful comments on our underlying fears about cloning.

that is repeatedly undercut by the doubly destabilizing and denaturalizing effects of these queer kinship improvisations and genetic impersonations. The substitutions that are facilitated by impersonation "queer" the singularity, intentionality, and directionality of desire. The scene in which Jerome hauls himself up the staircase to impersonate himself perfectly illustrates this: "I think she likes us," he says to Vincent, including himself as the plural object of desire for Irene. The composite fantasy of the new Jerome is the product of a homoerotic collaboration that is an impersonation of an impersonation: a vision of hypermasculine perfection as a cultural achievement in which genetic selection has already undermined the naturalness of identity and produced an artificially enhanced version of that masculinity.

In the face of the undoing of masculine singularity by these prosthetic relationalities and vicarious substitutions, the liberal humanism that has haunted the whole film surfaces more fully in the penultimate scene as a vehicle for masculine heroism in the absence of its more foundational securities. The film presents us (perhaps somewhat ironically) with *Gattaca*'s vision of humanity as the sign of resolution, harmony, and hope. As Jerome prepares to commit suicide, Vincent's impersonation of him is revealed to have been no secret to Gattaca's doctor, who has tested his blood and urine since his first genetic "interview" at the space station. All the costly and devoted labor of scientifically precise disguise is rendered potentially redundant by one unconscious masculine gesture: "For future reference, right-handed men don't hold it with their left, it's just one of those things," he tells Vincent. Replacing the image of Vincent's in-valid identification card with Jerome's valid one, he confesses to Vincent about his in-valid son, who would also like to work at Gattaca. The ultimate threat to expose Vincent's elaborate impersonation comes from a father with the power to prohibit, who decides not to because he wants a sign of hope for his own in-valid son. He is the good father who, unlike Vincent's own, recognizes human potential in vulnerability and wishes to protect the imperfection that is human nature. Against the eugenic values of Gattaca, the figure of the doctor at the space station is the skeptical scientist as a model of the humane gatekeeper; his humanity comes from a compassion borne of proximity to genetic in-validity. As the film's tagline puts it: "There is no gene for the human spirit." Or, we might conclude, if there is, it is an in-valid one.

In contrast to the doctor's humanity, the space station's vision of a "panhuman" future presented in the final scene in the rocket appears as artificial as its genetic engineering: the scene displays a markedly multicultural crew as reassurance against the potentially racist eugenics of ge-

netic determinism. As the camera pans around the inside of the spaceship, showing close-up shots of the different faces of the human race, a vision of multicultural diversity represents the new eugenic humanism of the future. Just as the image of a rocket launching into space as a symbol of Vincent's masculine achievement is a playful reiteration of a modern cliché of the gendering of technology, so the image of genetic technology producing a diverse global humanism leaves the audience with a familiar, and rather unconvincing, fantasy of unity through racial diversity. This highly modern version of "panhumanity" is produced by technology (the vision of the blue planet from space in the 1960s) and yet also promises to offer a resistance to technology (the potential evil of genetic determinism).[26] To be included in this fantasy of panhumanity, Vincent has first to be exposed, for "imposture is not imposture until its duplicity is laid bare, and when impostors persist, treading in their own footsteps, they are not deranged but faithful to a lifelong project that oscillates towards the spiritual" (Schwartz 1996, 71). If masculinity is sheer imposture, and Vincent realizes his ambition in the very moment his duplicity is laid bare, then the void left behind by such a disrobing might be filled by the promise of the power of the human spirit.

Cinematic fantasies of the new genetics push feminist film theory toward queer reflections on the limits of its own means of reproducing itself. If femininity as masquerade opened up the possibility of showing the contradictions of the place of woman as image in a patriarchal sign system, revealing in the end that there was, in fact, nothing behind the mask but another mask, masculinity as impersonation points to the dangerous illusory aspirations of singularity and perfection that govern the drive for agency, self-grounding, and authorship on the other side of the axis. But the display of the labor of artifice in the name of the genetic impersonation of masculine perfection troubles any easy attribution of gender, producing instead an ambiguity that plays across the binary of sexual difference, queering the previous categories of feminist film theory. For the hetero/homo distinction takes on a new significance in the culture of the copy, complicating the question of how we know "whose desire is being figured" (Sedgwick 1994, 157). The reproduction of sameness through sexual difference is no longer so straightforward when the means for assuring its continuity are new technologies of replication that trouble the authority of paternity, inheritance, and heterosexuality in the cultural imagination. Vicarious sexual substitutions proliferate in the new cultures designed to

[26] For an analysis of the concept of "panhumanity" in global culture, see Franklin, Lury, and Stacey 2000, 37–42.

imitate nature. It seems we should trust neither the cinematic nor the scientific evidence before us that promises perfection or predictability. If the artifice of the image (femininity as the presentation of the desire of the other) moves into the territory of the new genetic imaginary, in which technologies of cell replication provide the basis for fantasies for copying the self, then the battle over representation becomes, inevitably, a battle over reproduction in both its biological and cultural sense.

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